

westways

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Offshore Sanctuary

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEONARD J. AUBE



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The sheer cliffs of East Anacapa Island and its renowned natural arch (far right) rise sharply out of the sea.

A group of harbor seals lounges on the shore. Strewn across one another, they bask in the midday sun. A formation of brown pelicans flies by. Skimming the tips of the waves, they head for their roosts above the steep cliff walls. Just offshore, a thick kelp forest sways in the current of the clear ocean waters. The only sounds to be heard are the waves crashing against the rocky shore and an occasional shrill cry of a gull.

Welcome to Channel Islands National Park. This is what the mainland coast of Southern California used to look like.

Created by Congress in 1980,

Channel Islands National Park is composed of five islands that lie off the coast of Southern California. The park was formed to protect the natural and cultural resources of this unique environment of land and sea.

The park's islands—Santa Barbara, Anacapa, Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa and San Miguel—and their surrounding Pacific waters are home to a diverse array of life ranging from microscopic plankton on up to the largest creature on Earth, the blue whale, in addition to rare and endangered plants and animals.

Since the islands range in distance from 11 miles to 38 miles offshore, a trip to the park takes more planning



Actually an extension of the Santa Monica Mountains, the northern Channel Islands (above) form a chain of land that runs from east to west. Hikers on one of Anacapa's trails (below) get to see what Southern California's mainland coast looked like centuries ago.



than packing a cooler and driving up to an entrance gate.

The majority of visitors take full- or half-day sightseeing boat trips, but hiking, scuba diving and naturalist-guided excursions are available through the park service. Camping is permitted on Anacapa, San Miguel and Santa Barbara.

"You have this unbelievable wilderness in the shadow of Los Angeles," says Jack Fitzgerald, chief ranger of the park. "It's not easy to see, and it's not easy to get there, but that's why it's called a wilderness."

And it's a wilderness experience

CHANNEL ISLANDS NATIONAL PARK

On the other hand, through a quirk of island adaptation, the scrub jay is more vivid blue and a much larger bird than its mainland cousins.

In addition to the area's national park status, six nautical miles of ocean around each island were designated as the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary in 1980, making it the first national marine refuge on the West Coast. Approximately 1,250 square miles are protected by the park and the sanctuary.

As many as 27 species of whales and dolphins have been spotted within the sanctuary waters. The Santa Barbara Channel is home to orcas and a variety of dolphins. Blue, sperm and California gray whales ply the waters during their round-trip migration from Alaska to Baja California, which is great news for whale watchers.

When any national park is established, there has to be a compromise made between the efforts of conservation and the amount of damage done by visitors. In the case of Channel Islands National Park, conservation has been given a high priority. But that does not rule out the opportunity for visitors to go out and see all five islands and the marine sanctuary firsthand. "We try to allow for as much use and visitation as we can," says Fitzgerald.

Since the days of the Spanish explorers, cattle, sheep, pigs, house cats and other introduced animals, as well as exotic plants, have had a damaging effect on delicate island ecosystems, sometimes wiping out entire species of native plants and animals from sections of the islands.

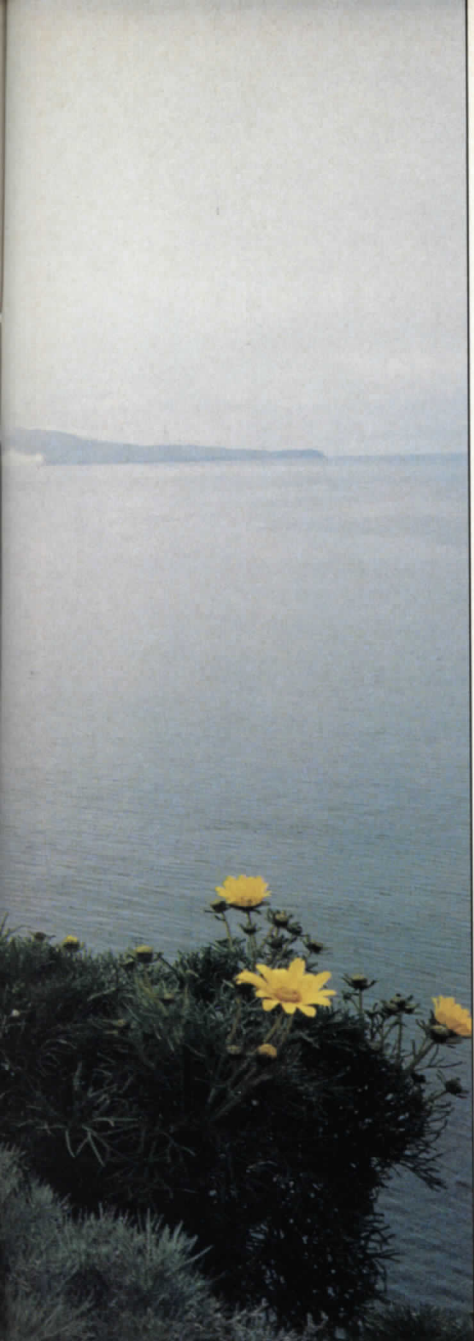
The most difficult and time-consuming project facing the park service is to study the damage, clear out the introduced flora and fauna, and re-establish the native plants, grasses and animals. It will be years before any lasting results can be measured.

There are additional obstacles as well. Most are due to the fact that the park's holdings are not islands unto themselves.

Some environmental impact is inevitable when a national park is so close to a major metropolitan area like Southern California and within one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world.

"The ocean is interconnected [with the Southern California mainland], and the environment is affected," says Fitzgerald, who worked on Anacapa as that island's ranger from 1981 to 1985 before becoming the park's chief ranger. "But there are a lot of large-scale environmental threats that are diminished by having the national park out there."

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found nowhere else in the world. Resident sea mammals include California sea lions, elephant seals, harbor seals—and northern fur seals and Guadalupe seals, both endangered species.

The brown pelican, once on the verge of extinction because of DDT contamination, is on its way back on Anacapa, the primary West Coast nesting site for the bird. There are 65 species of plants within the park boundaries that are found nowhere else. In the spring, vivid yellow-orange coreopsis flowers set the island ablaze with color. The island fox, a much smaller animal than the mainland fox, is found exclusively on the larger islands of the park.



In the spring, a profusion of flowering plants (top) takes over the islands' hilltops, meadows and canyons. Inside the marine sanctuary, a garibaldi (bottom) peeks around some kelp fronds to find a scuba diver.



A group of California sea lions has found an ideal spot to bask in the sun and keep an eye out for sea predators. The number of sea lions and other related mammals has risen dramatically in recent years, due in large part to conservation efforts.

The closest island to the mainland, Anacapa, is also the most visited. Anacapa—with a total land area of about 1 square mile—is actually three small islands inaccessible from one another except by boat. East Anacapa Island has a visitors' center, a campground that can hold up to 30 people and a 1.5-mile nature trail.

West Anacapa Island is a research area for the study of the brown pelican and is closed to the public, except for an area known as Frenchy's Cove. The cove has an excellent beach for snorkeling, diving and picnicking. The cove, however, is best known for its tidepools. The tidepools offer a fascinating look at the complex variety of life within an intertidal zone—the area of land and sea that exists between the highest high tide and the lowest low tide. In these zones one can spot abalones, sea stars, octopuses, urchins, crabs and eels.

Santa Cruz is the largest and most



A Pacific bottle-nosed dolphin takes to the air in the waters of the Santa Barbara Channel. Boat trips to the islands often are escorted by schools of dolphins that leap and swim off the bow. As many as 27 species of marine mammals have been spotted in the channel.

CHANNEL ISLANDS NATIONAL PARK

diverse of the islands in the national park. From the sea caves and sheltered coves to the lush valleys and a 2,400-foot peak, Santa Cruz has a wide variety of plants and animals. Although Santa Cruz is part of Channel Islands National Park and may be visited, the island is privately owned.

Nine-tenths of the island is owned by the Nature Conservancy, a large, not-for-profit conservation group. The remaining property on the east end of the island is owned by the Gherini family, who maintain a ranch there.

"The Nature Conservancy mission is to preserve our natural heritage. Santa Cruz represents a big slice of our heritage relatively undisturbed," says Bob Hansen, the organization's Southern California field representative and the president of the Santa Cruz Island Co.

The conservancy has been running day trips to the island for the past 10 years. Hansen estimates that about 1,500 people visit the island each year through the program.

The second largest island in the park is Santa Rosa. The eastern tip of the island is a large freshwater marsh area that attracts a variety of plants and birds. More than 160 bird species are found on the island. Torrey pine groves are found here; the only other stand of the trees in the world is located near La Jolla on the mainland. Offshore, extensive kelp forests envelop the entire island. Because of the thick kelp beds, the surrounding waters are the home of a vast number of species on the lower end of the food chain that feed the larger sea mammals and birds.

San Miguel is the most remote and rugged of the islands in the park. Its location as the westernmost island in the chain offers very little protection from the mainland and exposes it to heavy winds and rain and strong ocean currents.

Time spent on the island is truly a wilderness experience. That's probably why seals and sea lions like it so much. San Miguel's



extensive sandy beaches, most notably Point Bennett on the far western end of the island, are the perfect spot for as many as 10,000 sea mammals at a time that breed on the isolated shores.

Visits to San Miguel are limited to the summer months. Those who choose to take the six-hour boat ride from Ventura Harbor are richly rewarded. Ranger-led nature hikes are available with advance notice. For hardy souls, the 15-mile grand tour of the island takes hikers through one of the most spectacular wilderness areas found anywhere. Hikes of varying lengths can be arranged with the park service.

Far south of the four other islands in the park is Santa Barbara Island. The island is small, about 1 mile by one-half mile, but it has a visitors' center, a nature trail and a campground. The island actually is closer to Catalina than the national park islands. In the summer, the warmer water and the milder temperatures make it a destination for those in the know. Bird-watching is excellent. Observers may spot Western gulls, barn owls, American kestrels and meadowlarks.

Transportation to all five of the islands is available through Island Packers Inc., a charter boat company based at Ventura Harbor. The company has an exclusive arrangement with the National Park Service to provide trips to the islands and



Once on the verge of extinction, the brown pelican (top) is on the way back. The park service maintains three buildings (bottom) on East Anacapa Island.

the marine sanctuary.

The majority of the company's trips take visitors to Anacapa and Santa Cruz (Island Packers also has an agreement with the two private island companies on Santa Cruz), but regularly scheduled trips to the other three islands are planned from Memorial Day through the fall.

Although the park service limits the number of people on each outing, there is plenty of room on most excursions. The reason for the relatively few visitors, says Mark Connally, president and general manager of Island Packers, is that the park is still a little-known destination. "If the same number of people knew about these islands

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Offshore Sanctuary

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as they did about Catalina, we'd be beating people away from the door," he says. "People don't realize that they have their own national park in Southern California."

The park is also an educational experience, not only for scientists and researchers but also for those with an interest in what the park has to offer most—a remarkable number of unique natural attractions.

"I think the channel islands are a chance to look back 100 to 200 years ago, before we developed Southern California," says Judy Chovan, science education specialist at the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.

Chovan conducts museum programs and leads several field trips each year to the park and the marine sanctuary. "The islands are the most beautiful meetings of land and sea. They have it all—the sea mammals, the tidepools, the whales, the dolphins, the fish," she says.

For those unable to take the boat trip out to the islands, the next best thing to being there is the Channel Islands National Park Visitor Center at Ventura Harbor. The center has displays that show the birds, the plants and the land animals within the park, as well as a tidepool display of aquatic life. On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons from June through September, a live, underwater video hookup allows visitors to watch TV monitors as divers with cameras weave through the kelp forests.

Because of the lack of public awareness of Channel Islands National Park, there is the temptation to call it one of Southern California's best-kept secrets.

But for those who have crossed the channel and found the island's sheer cliffs, pristine beaches and thriving life on the sea and land, it's no secret. For them, it is an experience that stays in the memory for a long time. ☐

WESTWAYS managing editor ERIC SEYFARTH heads for the open spaces of Southern California whenever he gets the opportunity.

The Heart of Texas

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become inundated with water and clogged with mud.) "Back then, the state had neither the money nor people to develop parks," says John Holland, "and the CCC was very important to Texas."

Today, the CCC is no more, but, it is hoped, the caves of Texas will be around forever.

Cave Without a Name is 11 miles north of Boerne. Open daily except Tuesday from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M., with tours as visitors arrive, whether there are two or 22. For more information contact Cave Without a Name, Route 5, Box 5548, Boerne, TX 78006.

Cascade Caverns, off Interstate 10 (exit 543), are 14 miles northwest of San Antonio and 16 miles southeast of Boerne. Open daily from 9 A.M. to 6 P.M. in summer; 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. in winter; tours every 30 minutes. Tours take from 45 minutes to an hour. For more information contact Cascade Caverns, Route 4, Box 4110, Boerne, TX 78006.

Natural Bridge Caverns are on Natural Bridge Cavern Road eight miles west of Interstate 35 between San Antonio and New Braunfels. Open daily (except Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's) at 9 A.M. with tours every 30 minutes until last tour at 6 P.M. June, July, August and Labor Day weekend; other months the last tour leaves at 4 P.M. Tours last one hour and 20 minutes. For more information contact Natural Bridge Caverns, Route 20, Box 515, Natural Bridge Caverns, TX 78218.

Longhorn Caverns are in Longhorn Cavern State Park on Park Road 4, six miles off U.S. 281 near Burnet. Open every day except Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with tours on the hour from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. weekdays, to 5 P.M. weekends in September and from March to Memorial Day. For more information contact Longhorn Cavern State Park, Route 2, Box 23, Burnet, TX 78611. ☐

Freelance writer-photographer ELEANOR MORRIS' last feature for WESTWAYS was on Nova Scotia's scenic Cabot Trail.